

Central and South Central Kansas Weather summary 2004

TRAGIC FLASH FLOOD SWEEPS ACROSS KANSAS TURNPIKE LABOR DAY WEEKEND TO HIGHLIGHT SEVERE WEATHER SEASON

Nationally, 2003 will long be remembered for the unprecedented tornado outbreak that occurred in early May. However, for residents of east-central Kansas, and especially those employed by the Kansas Turnpike Authority, it will long be remembered for the tragic flash flood that swept across a narrow section of the Kansas Turnpike during the evening of August 30th about 10 miles southwest of Emporia. Early that evening, torrential rainfalls around eight inches occurred over parts of Chase and Lyon Counties. Of this amount, six inches had occurred in about a two-hour period from 7-9 PM CDT. What resulted was a flash flood of epic proportions that claimed six lives.



It is a known fact that torrential rains can turn a docile creek into a raging river within an hour. Jacob s Creek confirmed in dramatic fashion just how true that is. Prior to the heavy rains, Jacob s Creek had been almost dry, but that changed quickly, as a six-seven foot surge swept across the turnpike from the southeast in mini tsunami-like fashion. So great was the force of the water that an 80-yard stretch of concrete medians, each weighing 10,000-12,000 pounds separating the northeast & southwest bound lanes, collapsed, sending seven vehicles off the turnpike and into the creek. Of the vehicles, one was a mini-van transporting a six-member family traveling northeast toward Kansas City. Of the six occupants, five lost their lives; the mother and all four children. Each youngster was under 10 years of age. A sixth fatality, a 31-year old man, perished when his vehicle stalled. Some of the vehicles were found one and a half miles from the interstate.

The event in itself was terrifying enough, but the fact it occurred at night made it even more so. Kansas Turnpike Authority staff as well as members of the Kansas Highway Patrol could not recollect there ever having been a flood reaching the turnpike at this location in at least 30 years.

While Central, South-Central, and Southeast Kansas managed to avoid catching the brunt of the tornado outbreak in early May, tornadoes still paid visits to the region. Thru September 30th, 33 tornadoes had been reported in the Wichita County Warning Area. The most significant was an F-3 that ripped across Woodson County on May 8th. The tornado possessed a track 20 miles long, about 1/4 mile wide, inflicted an estimated \$1 million damage from 2 miles east of Toronto to 5 miles northeast of Yates Center, and injured 3 people.

The costliest tornado was an F-1 that struck Labette County on May 4th: \$2.5 million. The tornado was 12 miles long, about 1/8 mile wide, tracked from 6 miles southwest of Bartlett to 1 mile east of Chetopa, and injured one person.

-1-

Severe thunderstorms made sure their contributions weren't overlooked. On July 9th, severe thunderstorms bombed Northwest Harper County with softball-sized hail that crashed through the roof of a country home. The monstrous hailstone landed in a closet and reportedly possessed a circumference of 10.5 inches.

Severe thunderstorms raked much of South-Central Kansas that evening. Damaging winds around 80 mph whipped across Sedgwick and Butler counties. Wichita Greyhound Park was heavily damaged when its roof was torn off the facility resulting in the closure of the park for 2 weeks. In Butler County, microburst-induced winds caused considerable damage in El Dorado and El Dorado State Park.

Much attention has been paid to lightning safety, and for good reason. On August 19th, lightning struck a gun barrel tank in Saline County. So forceful was the strike that the tank was catapulted across an adjacent two-lane highway as it exploded. The tank knocked down power lines severing power to about 900 customers for nearly three hours. The explosion set fire to four nearby tanks, one truck, and 140 barrels of oil.

The severe local storm season is considered over. But please keep in mind that severe weather in Kansas covers almost the entire spectrum and can occur at any time of the year. Even an ordinary thunderstorm possesses deadly side-effects. But now that October has arrived, the focus will turn toward winter weather, which like its spring and summer colleagues, can prove lethal and must be treated with respect.